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SHORT STORIES

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON (OF PEARSON'S WEEKLY)

No. 293.—Vol. XI. FOR WEEK ENDING AUGUST 11, 1894. [Price One Penny.

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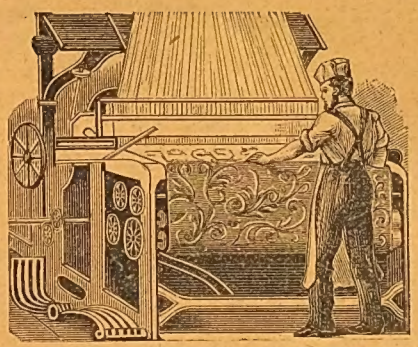

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No. 293.—Vol. XI. *FOR THE WEEK ENDING AUGUST 11, 1894.* [PRICE ONE PENNY.

BIBLIOTHECA BODLEIANA

TOWARD the middle of the seventeenth century the animosity of the Peruvian Indians against the Spaniards still existed in all its energy; traditions only too faithful preserved among this oppressed and down-trodden people the frightful remembrance of the cruelty of their conquerors. They were conquered, but not submissive.

At this time a Viceroy, more cruel than any of his predecessors, filled the measure of their hate. His secretary, a hard and avaricious man, hated even more than his master, suddenly died, and it was universally believed that he had been poisoned by the Indians. It was well known that they were acquainted with the most deadly poisons, and more than once they had been convicted of using them, but neither torture nor death could make them confess their guilt.

In the meanwhile the Viceroy was recalled, and in his place the Count de Cinchon was appointed. The Count, gifted with the most amiable qualities, and with every virtue that could conciliate the mind and win the heart, had just married a young and charming wife.

The Countess was anxious to accompany her husband, but, fearing the hate and perfidy of the Indians, he decided to leave her in Spain. The thought of her husband's exposure to such peril, however, determined the Countess to follow him to the New World. She took with her several ladies, who were to compose her Court at Lima. Among them was her dearest friend, Donna Beatrice.

The Indians, delighted to be rid of their Viceroy, were no better disposed toward his successor; he was a Spaniard, and consequently they expected from him only injustice, greed, and tyranny. In vain they were told that the Count de Cinchon was humane and just; they repeated, "He is a Spaniard." This word to them said all that the most energetic hate could express. It was evident that the conquerors had failed to impress upon the natives the sublime moral of religion; they had been induced to practise a few external observations, but in their hearts they cherished all of their old superstitions and their idolatry.

The Spaniards little suspected the secret vengeance which the Indians in their misery, cherished. They had been forced to give up to their oppressors their gold and precious stones, but they still retained their greatest treasures, in the wonderful antidotes against poison which Providence had given them, and above all, in the bark of the quinquinna tree, of the properties of which they alone knew the secret, and which they had engaged by the most solemn oaths, frequently renewed, never to reveal.

Since the early days of slavery, the Indians had preserved a kind of interior government; they appointed chiefs, whose duty it was to assemble their people from time to time in some wild place, inaccessible to Europeans, where each renewed his own vows of secrecy and hate of the Spaniards. The Indians outside the city had far more freedom than those engaged on the public works, or those in the service of the Viceroy's palace; and they never failed to attend the midnight assemblies, which they regarded as their sole resource against tyranny.

Their principal chief (for there were several) was Ximeo, a man naturally noble and generous; but, from continual brooding over the wrongs of his people, his heart had closed to every sweet and tender emotion. Ximeo had one son, named Mirvan, who had inherited his father's nobility of mind, as well as his hatred of the Spaniards; he had married Zuma, the belle of the environs of Lima, and they had one child, a boy two years old.

Another chief, Azan, was second only to Ximeo in his influence over the Indians. Azan was cruel and vindictive; no virtue tempered the fury with which he always seemed animated. These two chiefs had a most illustrious origin, and were descended from the royal race of Incas.

A few days after the arrival of the new Viceroy, Ximeo appointed for the following night a meeting on the hill of the "tree of health," as they designated the quinquinna tree, and when they were all assembled he said, "Friends, a new tyrant is to reign over us, unhappy Children of the Sun, who are

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forced to envelop ourselves in darkness in order to renew the oaths of a just vengeance. Let us repeat around the 'tree of health' the terrible formula which engages us for ever to conceal our secrets."

In a loud, firm tone Ximeo then cried: "We swear never to reveal to the Europeans the divine virtues of this sacred tree, the sole treasure which is left us! Woe to the faithless and perjured Indian who, seduced by fear or weakness, would reveal this secret to the destroyer of his gods, of his sovereigns, and of his country! Woe to the coward who would give this precious possession to the barbarians who have enslaved us, who have enslaved our lands, and who have shed the blood of our fathers, after making them suffer unheard of tortures! Let them keep the gold which they covet, but let us preserve this gift from heaven!

"If a traitor be found among us, let us swear to pursue him, and to destroy him, though he be our father, our brother, our son! Let us swear if he be married, to pursue his wife and children, if they have not already denounced him, and to sacrifice them that his race may become extinct. Friends, do you all renew these oaths which your forefathers made, and which you have pronounced so often?"

"Yes, yes!" shouted the Indians. "We swear to keep these secrets with inviolable fidelity, and to suffer, if necessary, the most frightful torments and death, rather than reveal them."

The Vice-Queen, on her arrival at the gate of Lima, was met by a crowd of young Indian girls, carrying baskets of flowers. Zuma was their leader, and the Countess was so struck with her beauty, her grace, and the lovely expression of her face, that, a few days later, the young Indian was appointed to the service of the palace, and later to that of the Countess's person. This favour seemed most imprudent to Donna Beatrice, whose love for the Vice-Queen made her listen only too willingly to the stories of the perfidy of the Indians. She not only believed all that was told her, but in her anxiety she conceived the greatest aversion to Zuma, which became stronger when it was found impossible to prejudice the Countess against her.

The Vice-Queen daily grew more fond of the object of so much calumny and injustice. Zuma, on her side, had the tenderest affection for the Vice-Queen, but, in order to avoid disagreeable scenes, she kept in her own rooms unless the Countess required her presence.

In the meantime the Viceroy spared nothing in his endeavour to win the confidence of the Indians; but they had seen many viceroys in the beginning of their reigns display the same amiability and justice, so that the real goodness of the Count made no impression. It was looked upon as duplicity, or as weakness caused by the terror which the secretary's sudden death had inspired.

The Countess had been in Lima four months, when her health began to fail. At first it was attributed to the heat of the climate, but her sufferings increased daily, so that the greatest anxiety was felt; then she was suddenly seized with a violent fever. Every known remedy was used without effect. The distress of Donna Beatrice knew no bounds; she questioned the physician who had accompanied them from Spain, and he, feeling his skill baffled, spoke mysteriously, and implied some extraordinary cause. His manner, his reticence, gave Beatrice the horrible idea that her friend was dying of a slow poison. From that moment she knew no repose.

Though she carefully concealed her suspicions from the Countess, and even from the Count, it was impossible to do so from the two ladies-in-waiting, who strengthened them. But who could have committed this awful crime? No other than Zuma; Zuma, who entered the apartments of the Vice-Queen at all hours. But after having been treated with so much kindness and affection by the Countess, how could she commit such an atrocity? Zuma was "hypocritical, vain, ambitious," said the envious. In short, she was an Indian, and familiar with the darkest crimes.

During all these agitations, Zuma thought only of the Vice-Queen, whom she loved with the sincerity of a pure and grateful heart. She was deeply grieved that, although she knew of an infallible cure for the fever which was consuming her mistress, it was impossible to give it to her. Zuma knew only too well the terrible oaths by which the Indians had bound themselves never to reveal the secret. If only her own life had depended upon her speaking, she would not have hesitated for a moment; but this revelation would devote her husband and her child to certain death. Moreover, Ximeo, in order to assure himself of her discretion, had taken her little one as a hostage and placed him in the hands of the cruel Azan.

In the meanwhile the invalid grew worse; the fever, which had somewhat abated for a while, returned with renewed violence, and the physician admitted that he feared the Countess would not be able to resist the disease. Consternation was universal in the palace. The Vice-Queen, fully aware of her condition, showed the greatest courage and piety. She received the Sacrament, bade her friends farewell, and commended to her husband the happiness of the Indians, especially that of her dear Zuma. These duties performed, she calmly awaited death. Zuma, whose health had failed sensibly during the past three months, on witnessing the pathetic scene, was overcome, and that very evening was taken with the same disease of which the Countess was dying—the tierce fever.

Alarmed at her condition, Mirvan, with the consent of the Indians, secretly carried to his wife the precious powder which was to cure her; but only one dose, which he was to renew each day. Zuma received in the morning the first, which she was to take in the evening.

When she was alone, she looked at the powder; her tears flowed, and, raising her eyes to heaven, "Great God," she cried, "it is Thou who inspirest me! I can save her only by sacrificing myself; my part is taken. I will not reveal the secret; besides, they will not suspect such devotion, and they will attribute the recovery of my dear mistress to the medicines of the physician. I shall expose neither Mirvan nor my son, and I shall not have betrayed our oaths. I shall die, but she will live. Of what importance is the life of poor Zuma? How much more precious that of this child of heaven, the generous benefactress of the poor slave! Have I not just now heard her failing voice pray for the cruel Indians who leave her to die? Oh, my dearest mistress! Amid the shadows of death thou hast not forgotten thy faithful Zuma. I have heard thee pronounce her name and bless it. Yes, I swear by the sacred light of the sun, I swear to save thee!"

Zuma then carefully wrapped up the precious quinquinna powder, placed it in her bosom, and considered the means by which she might enter the cabinet where the medicines of the countess were kept. She had no idea of the horrible suspicions formed against her, nor that precautions had been taken to keep her, as well as all the other Indians, from this room. She believed that, since the Vice-Queen's illness, the Spanish ladies reserved to themselves exclusively the service of the interior, through zeal and jealousy, or by one of those customs which they called etiquette. She decided to go into this cabinet in the evening, when she would find only one attendant, who would probably be asleep; in the contrary case, she would say that her anxiety forced her to come to make inquiries of the invalid's state. At the same time, wishing to find out if it would be possible to enter without passing through the apartment of the countess, she descended into a long corridor, which she carefully examined; she saw that a little door opened into this corridor, just as she had imagined, and that the key was in the lock. She made up her mind to enter in the night on this side, and then she returned to her room.

All of Zuma's movements were carefully watched, and Donna Beatrice was told that in the morning Mirvan had visited his wife, leaving her apartment under great excitement—that later, Zuma had descended the stairs, and going through the corridor, had carefully examined the doors, stopping finally at the cabinet; then she had hastily returned to her room. Beatrice instantly divined that Zuma intended to slip into the cabinet in the evening. The women-in-waiting were ordered to watch the moment when the young Indian left her chamber, to leave the cabinet empty and the key in the door. Then Beatrice went to inform the Viceroy. Without adopting her suspicions, he was, nevertheless, very much agitated, and

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agreed to conceal himself with her to watch further developments.

During the evening, Beatrice was told that Zuma was stealthily coming down the staircase in the dim light. The watchers quickly concealed themselves. Presently, they heard the door of the cabinet softly open and Zuma appeared. She was pale and trembling, walking slowly and with great effort. She first listened at the door which opened into the apartment of the Countess. All was quiet. Then Zuma approached the table on which stood a glass containing the medicine of the Countess; into this she emptied the quinquinna powder. Immediately the horrified Viceroy sprang from the cabinet, crying, "Wretch, what have you done? What have you put into that glass?"

At this appearance, and upon hearing this question in such a frightful voice, the terror-stricken Zuma fell, saying, "I am lost!" She had fainted. They carried her to her room. The Count and Donna Beatrice decided that they would conceal the intended crime from the Vice-Queen. "She would ask pardon for this monster," said Count de Cinchon, "and nothing on earth would make me grant it. An example is necessary, and I will make it."

The report was instantly spread through the palace and the city that Zuma was accused of having attempted to poison the Vice-Queen. That same evening she was taken to prison.

Mirvan on hearing the report went to find Azan. "You have my son in your power," said he. "At least promise me that, if we guard the secret faithfully, you will, after our death, give up the child to my father."

"I swear it," replied Azan, "but be assured that the least indiscretion will cost him his life."

"We shall know how to die," said Mirvan.

He then left the fierce Indian, and voluntarily gave himself up as a prisoner. He had at once divined Zuma's intention, but he could justify her only by giving up their child to the rage of the fierce Azan. He resolved, therefore, to die with his unhappy wife.

At daybreak the council assembled to examine and judge the prisoners. The doors of the great hall were opened, and it was announced to the Indians that they were permitted to enter. They came in great numbers with their secret chiefs, Ximeo, Azan, and Thamir. Mirvan and Zuma were led in, both of them loaded with chains. Zuma, on seeing Mirvan, cried out: "Oh, he is not guilty! He had no share in what I did. He was entirely ignorant of my purpose."

Into this she emptied powder.

"Stop, Zuma," interrupted her husband. "Thy death is certain. Canst thou think of preserving my life? I am not accused, but I share thy fate. Zuma, let us die with courage, and our child will live."

Zuma comprehended the true sense of these words and said nothing.

The examination began. Zuma would not deny the act which both Beatrice and the Viceroy had witnessed. She was asked from whom she had received the powder which she put into the draught.

"She received it from me," said Mirvan.

Zuma denied this, affirming anew that her husband was ignorant of her intention.

"And what was your intention?" they demanded.

"It was not to poison the Vice-Queen."

"Why then did you use the powder? Did you believe that you were using a salutary remedy?"

At this question Zuma trembled. Her eyes met those of the savage Azan, whose threatening glance filled her heart with terror. In imagination she saw him murdering her child.

"No, no!" said she with a vacant look. "No, I cannot say that it was a salutary remedy."

"It was poison then? You confess it?"

"I confess nothing."

Then Ximeo came forward and placed himself between the husband and wife, saying: "Let them put me in the chains also; I will die with my children."

"Oh, my father, live for our little one!" exclaimed Mirvan and Zuma together.

But Ximeo persisted.

The judges had received orders not to use torture nor to seek accomplices. They removed Ximeo, and led the unfortunate pair back to prison. The physician of the Countess was examined; he declared that the Vice-Queen's malady had resisted the most powerful remedies, that it was attended by the most extraordinary symptoms, so that he could not avoid having suspicions; that the action of Zuma, leaving no doubt of the atrocity of her design, had confirmed his opinion that this wicked slave had been giving the Countess a slow poison; and that, later, finding herself excluded from the service of the chamber, and fearing that the youth of the Vice-Queen and the care with which she was guarded would triumph over a slow poison, she had endeavoured to consummate her crime by a strong dose. At this evidence the judges shuddered with horror, and at once condemned the prisoners to be burned at the stake that very day at noon.

They were brought back into the hall to hear their sentence. Mirvan showed a heroic firmness. Zuma threw herself at his feet, saying, "I am thy destroyer! That is my only grief. Oh! forgive me!"

"Stop!" he replied. "Accuse only the cruelty of our judges! Console thyself, Zuma. The tyrants who condemn us deliver us from a frightful yoke. In a few hours we shall no longer be their slaves."

These words moved even the hard heart of Azan. "Mirvan!" he cried, "have no fear for thy son; he shall be dearer to me than if he were my own."

It was nine o'clock in the morning; orders were given to prepare the stakes. The Vice-Queen was dying; the physician informed the Viceroy that it was impossible for the Countess to endure a third attack of fever. The Count, in the depths of despair, could not think of mercy.

The Count, unwilling to remain in Lima during the execution, rode out to a country house a few miles from the city, intending to return in the evening.

The unhappy Ximeo in vain revolved in his mind a thousand projects to save Mirvan and Zuma. He wished to consult with his friends, but during the whole morning the Indians were so strictly watched that there was not even a possibility of conversing in secret with Azan or Thamir. Soon a proclamation ordered all the Indians who were in Lima to attend the execution. They were unarmed. The Spanish guard was doubled, and surrounded the pile; besides, two hundred soldiers were to escort the unfortunate victims. There was nothing but submission, and Ximeo, past hope, prayed for courage to throw himself into the burning pile with his children.

While the whole excited city was waiting for this frightful spectacle, the Vice-Queen was weaker and more miserable than ever. The agitation of those around her had been extreme since six o'clock, and she was at last struck by it; she saw clearly that Beatrice was concealing something from her. Beatrice often left the room to gain composure, and during one of these periods of absence the countess insisted

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She fell into the arms of the priest.

upon an explanation, until one of the women-in-waiting gave an account of everything, adding that Zuma and Mirvan, far from denying their guilt, had gloried in it.

The surprise of the Countess was only equalled by the horror with which the frightful recital inspired her. "O, Infinite Mercy!" she cried, "I invoke Thee with more confidence than ever."

She at once ordered an open litter to be prepared. The women wrapped her in a long muslin robe, and, notwithstanding the tears and expostulations of the Spanish ladies and of Beatrice, who had hastened to her, the Countess was laid on the litter and carried by four slaves. A fifth held over her a large parasol. Lying thus, her face covered with a white veil, she gave the order to convey her to the place of execution.

Twelve o'clock sounded. The doors of the prison were opened, and Mirvan and Zuma came out, loaded with chains. Zuma, scarcely able to sustain herself, leaned on the arm of a priest, and was attended by two soldiers. An immense crowd pressed forward to see her. In this multitude she saw Azan holding her little child in his arms. At this sight she uttered a despairing cry, a mother's cry, which resounded in the depths of every heart, and, summoning all her strength, she extricated herself from the priest and the soldiers, and, darting towards Azan, she embraced her son.

"Zuma," said Azan softly, "be strong, courageous. Remember that your death will be a vengeance, and that it makes our secret still more inviolable."

"No vengeance!" replied Zuma bitterly. "Oh! if I could only have saved the Vice-Queen!"

She could say no more; the soldiers again surrounded her, and again they took up the line of march.

It was only three hundred paces to the place of execution. A mournful trumpet announced the approach of the victims; the top of the pile, which was formed of resinous wood, was set on fire.

At this sight Zuma trembled with horror; the remembrance of her husband and child gave place to stupor; she thought only of the near destruction; she saw only inevitable death under the most frightful aspect; strength left her, her frozen blood no longer circulated in her veins; her face turned a deadly pallor, and, without losing consciousness, she fell into the arms of the priest, who, notwithstanding her vague protestations, continually exhorted her to repent.

"Zuma," said Mirvan, "our death will not be painful. Look at those whirls of smoke. We shall be stifled in a moment."

"Oh," replied Zuma, in a smothered voice, "I see only fire, only those awful flames!"

However, they were advancing, and each step that brought Zuma nearer to her last moment increased her unconquerable terror. Now they saw distinctly the Indians, sullen and terror-stricken, ranged round the pile, and bearing in sign of mourning great branches of cypress. The guard of Spanish soldiers surrounded the Indians.

Suddenly in the distance cries were heard. A horseman appeared riding at full speed, and shouted, "Stop the execution! the Vice-Queen commands it! She follows me!"

All waited. Zuma, with hands and eyes uplifted, prayed for strength, but her mind, weakened by terror, could feel no hope. At last the litter of the Vice-Queen was seen. Her bearer, urged by her, quickened their steps; they soon reached the unhappy pair. The Spanish guard hastened to range themselves around the Vice-Queen, The Indians approached and formed a half-circle opposite her, then the Countess, raising her veil, revealed a countenance pale and languid, but full of a more than earthly sweetness.

"I have not the happy privilege of granting pardon," said she, "but I am sure of obtaining it from the goodness of the Viceroy. While waiting, I take under my protection these two unfortunate ones. Let their irons be broken. Let them extinguish this frightful pile, which never should have been kindled had I known of it earlier."

At these words all the Indians, throwing down their cypress-branches, made the air ring with cries of "Long live the Vice-Queen!" Ximeo rushed from the crowd, exclaiming, "Yes! she shall live!"

Zuma fell on her knees. "All powerful God! finish Thy work!" she prayed.

The Vice-Queen invited Mirvan and Zuma to attend her.

She returned to the palace, followed by the immense crowd, who enthusiastically blessed her for her mercy and goodness.

To receive from her the life-giving medicine.

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As soon as they arrived at the palace, the Vice-Queen was laid on her bed, and she ordered Mirvan and Zuma to place themselves on either side. Fatigue and emotion had so exhausted her strength that she believed herself to be dying. She extended one hand to Mirvan and the other to Zuma, who received them kneeling, and bathed them with tears. Beatrice, unable to endure so harrowing a sight, begged that the Indians might be removed and guarded in the next apartment.

"No, no," said the Countess, "I answer for them, and I answer before the Supreme Arbiter who will judge us all! Leave them here. They are going to open the gates of Heaven for me."

"Great God!" said Beatrice. "To see you in the arms of these monsters who have poisoned you!"

"Where could I be better at this moment?" replied the Vice-Queen. "I should feel in the arms of friendship only vain regrets, but these trembling hands which I press in mine, strengthen my courage; the sight alone of the unfortunates fills my heart with a calm sense of security."

"Oh! my benefactress!" said Zuma, "if heaven betray my last hope, they will see if the unhappy Zuma loved you! No, I shall not be able to survive you!"

At these words, Beatrice exclaimed, "Detestable hypocrisy!"

"Do not insult them," interrupted the Countess. "They repent; see their tears flow! Zuma," she added, "you, whose lovely face indicates a heavenly mind, you, whom I have loved so well—could I cherish the slightest resentment against you? I look upon you both as the instruments of my eternal happiness. I pardon you with all my heart! May you be able to turn to religion with the same sincerity. I have sent a courier for my husband, who will, I know, confirm me in my position."

Zuma, almost beside herself, was about to speak, perhaps to reveal a part of the secret which weighed upon her more than when she had only her own life to protect, when an extraordinary uproar was heard in the court of the palace. An instant later, the Countess distinguished the voice of her husband. She ordered the door of her apartment to be opened, crying, "Pardon, pardon for the criminals."

Zuma held in her hand a branch of the "tree of health."

"They are your deliverers," said the Viceroy, as he entered. Everyone was transfixed with astonishment. The Viceroy held in his arms a young child. Zuma uttered a cry of joy. It was her little son. The Count laid the child in her arms and threw himself at her feet. Ximeo followed him, and addressing Mirvan, said, "My son, thou canst speak, by the consent of all our people. The secret is revealed. We have all taken the powder in the presence of the Viceroy, and he has taken some himself before bringing it here."

At these words, Zuma pressed her child to her heart, returning thanks to Heaven. Mirvan embraced his father; the Countess asked a thousand questions. The Viceroy rapidly related all that the Indians had revealed to him.

"Great God!" cried the Vice-Queen, throwing her arms round Zuma, "this angelic creature, who was sacrificing herself for me, they were going to burn alive! When she was doing an action as sublime as touching, they were accusing her of an unparalleled crime!"

"The terrors of this heroic pair for their child's life," added the viceroy, "made them, with invincible firmness, endure shame, ignominy, and the prospect of a frightful death."

"Ah!" said Zuma, "the Vice-Queen did more. She believed us monsters of ingratitude and wickedness, and yet she protected and delivered us!"

"She is to receive, as well as you, the reward of so many virtues: you are to cure her. Here are two doses of the beneficent powder, one for the Vice-Queen and one for Zuma."

While speaking, the Viceroy himself mixed the quinine with water in two cups. Zuma drank the first, and the Countess asked to receive from her the life-giving medicine.

The Vice-Queen, already revived by joy and hope, received with delight the embraces of her husband, of Beatrice, and of the happy Zuma; she lavished the sweetest caresses upon Zuma's child, and promised from that hour to be his second mother.

Beatrice and all the Spanish ladies surrounded Zuma. Beatrice passionately kissed her hand, that beneficent hand which she had accused of committing an awful crime.

In the midst of the enthusiasm the Viceroy led Mirvan and Zuma to a balcony which overlooked the broad street filled with Indians and Spaniards. "Behold," said he, pointing to Mirvan and Zuma, "the victims of gratitude and of the sanctity of oaths! Indians! their sublime virtues, and those of the Vice-Queen alone, could release yourselves from the cruel vow made through vengeance. You have done so. You have become the benefactors of the old world. To make you happy is not only for us hereafter a duty of humanity, but one of gratitude: it shall be fulfilled. Indians, all of you in this memorable assembly—Indians, you are free; such sentiments make you worthy to become the equals of your conquerors. Enjoy this glory. It is virtue that gives you liberty. Love your sovereign; be faithful to him. Lands shall be distributed among you. Make the 'tree of health' flourish there, and in cultivating it remember that it is to you the whole world will owe this gift of the Creator."

This address excited enthusiasm, and the Viceroy, desiring to end the day with the triumph of Zuma, caused her to be magnificently dressed, and placed in a palanquin, with all the court ladies in attendance, and the Vice-Queen's guard of honour to accompany her. A mounted herald preceded the cortége, crying, "Behold Zuma, the wife of the virtuous Mirvan, and the deliverer of the Vice-Queen!"

Zuma, reclining on cushions of cloth-of-gold, with her child beside her, held in her hand a branch of the "tree of health."

In this manner she passed through the principal streets of Lima, amid the acclamations of the people.

When she returned to the palace, after an affecting interview with the Vice-Queen, she was conducted to a beautiful apartment, newly prepared for her and her husband, with attendants to serve them; for from thenceforth they were to be treated as the most intimate, the dearest friends of the Countess.

In the evening, the city was illuminated, and in the gardens tables sumptuously laden were prepared for the Indians.

The fever left the Vice-Queen almost immediately, and at the end of eight days she was rapidly recovering health.

In the very place where the fatal pile had been laid, the Viceroy raised an obelisk of white marble, on which was inscribed in letters of gold:

TO ZUMA,
THE FRIEND AND DELIVERER OF THE VICE-QUEEN,
AND THE BENEFACTOR
OF THE OLD WORLD.

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THE ASSASSIN.

A STORY FROM THE FRENCH.

"DOUBTLESS," said the old man, shaking his head, and closing his eyes that tears had dimmed—"doubtless you find it strange that I am sad, dull, with an air of taking an interest in nothing? I who have everything to make a man of my age happy: a comfortable income, a pretty house in the outskirts of the village, and behind the house a beautiful garden where I can cultivate at will roses and other flowers.

"There still remain to me old friends who would ask nothing better than to dine with me once a week, to empty with me at dessert a bottle of the wine of Anjou, and who would be gay and joyous as the refrains of those grand old songs that one sings no more!

"It would be a good and tranquil life, sweet and regular, with delicate menus and mutual interests which we could discuss slowly, lingeringly, in order not to finish with them too quickly.

"But, sir, a life like this is not for me; peace, happiness, the beauties of my grounds, the sight of people smiling about my table, breaks my heart, and it is two years now that I have slept badly and alone in my comfortable bed!"

"Yes, I know; they told me of your sorrow—your wife's death, so long ago."

He drew his hand hurriedly across his wet eyes.

"They told you that," he said; "but they did not tell you all. You know that my wife is dead—true; but not that it was I who killed her."

"Killed her!"

I drew back quickly.

He did not, or possibly feigned not, to see this movement of recoil.

"Alas, yes! Not only that I am a widower, but I am also an assassin. Listen!

"Though old, both of us, we loved each other so dearly, Benedicite and I, you would have laughed to see us. Young people of to-day do not comprehend this prolonged tenderness, which is discouraged neither by deep wrinkles nor whitening hair.

"Having grown old together, we thought not of having aged, the slow coming of our decline escaping us precisely because of our mutual attention, as one sees not the putting forth of a branch from a stem from which one turns not the eyes.

"And this accord of our aging together continued to keep us blind to the ravages of time, she in me and I in her, till the moment when the night itself fell, as one is blinded by long association and habit to the decay of ancient furniture that we love.

"We loved each other, a couple of sexagenarians, with the ardour and simplicity of the sixteen years of other days, our long marriage but seeming to continue the happiness of the betrothal hours.

"As we had always retained from our youth the habit of early rising, one might daily encounter us before seven o'clock wandering through the fields or walking beside the river under the drooping willows, a little apart, but holding each other's hands and with that swinging movement of the arm that has the appearance of rocking a cradle. Benedicite escaping at times to run a little skipping leap that denied her rheumatism, to cull the marguerites that grew by the wayside, and which she had always loved so much. It was thus we were ridiculous, but happy, for I did not perceive all there was of childishness and madness in our superannuated joys.

"Then suddenly Benedicite fell ill. It was serious from the first, declared the doctor, giving a name to the malady that I do not wish to recall. My astonishment equalled my despair. A malady that was serious—that was death! I was so content with life I had never even thought of dying. Moreover, we were too young, Benedicite and I.

"But behold this cruel mischance, that recalled me to the reality, that obliged me to think of pain, sorrow, of a lonely old age, of separations, of the cemetery. What! Such a thing as this could be? Benedicite would die, and I would continue to live!

"I did not wish to believe in the possibility of such a disaster; I would not believe in it, and with smiles, as sincere as tender, encouraged to coming convalescence my dear wife—a little too pale, perhaps, though always so, even as a young girl—stretched in her easy chair by the window, through which the sun she loved streamed and gave so much pleasure to her heart.

"But soon there happened a frightful thing. Benedicite's illness became complicated with sharp, intolerable sufferings. To see her writhing in convulsive agony, to hear her rattling under a hand that strangled her—ah, it was more than I was able to bear!

"The doctor had given her a soothing potion, which, taken by the spoonful, hour by hour, quieted these torments; a dangerous drug, however, a deadly poison, mortal for whoever drank it in larger doses, and specified in his directions to be used with the utmost caution.

"I shook with nervous tremours whenever, implored by Benedicite, I carried to her lips the brimming spoon that she emptied eagerly in her longing for sleep and ease.

"But day after day the malady grew worse.

"'Your wife is lost,' said the doctor, when one evening I followed him to the door to question him without her hearing me; 'she is already sinking.'

"Benedicite lost! Benedicite sinking! The bare thought of my solitude in this world when she had gone made me stagger and clutch the doctor for support. No hope! The doctor left, and I threw myself despairingly upon the sofa in our little sitting-room, trying to gather my thoughts.

"Then, mad with terror, I ran to the telegraph office and wired for a specialist from Paris. When I returned Benedicite was in her last moments.

"Thus was no illusion left me. It was true—it was certain, Benedicite was going to die—to die in two hours—in one hour—before the clock could sound again, and I, tortured, powerless, heart-broken, could only watch her toss and turn and stiffen herself on that bed of pain which groaned and bent beneath her.

Suddenly she raised herself erect and gazed at me with a haggard look.

"'I can bear it no longer!' she cried. 'I can bear it no longer, this suffering I endure. I am dying, you know that; and I wish to die, to die at once! Give it to me, I beseech you, give it to me—I am the same as dead! Give it all to me, I beseech you!'

"And she designated with her shaking fingers, her dim eyes, all her poor tormented body bending eagerly forward—the little bottle that contained the deadly fluid that once had given her ease.

"What would you have done, you, I ask you, had you been in my place? She was racked with torture, she was dying—the doctor had said it. I could bear no longer to see her suffer thus.

"I yielded to her will, and, all trembling, lifted the phial to the eager lips, which glued themselves to it firmly, and drank and drank—till the phial was drained to the dregs. Benedicite fell back upon her pillow, a long shudder ran through her frame, and I held between my own her hands, still warm, but little by little growing colder.

"Two hours later, as I watched beside my dead, I heard a carriage stop at the door.

"'Master,' said the servant, 'the Paris doctor.'

"He entered. He looked at the body, examined it critically, turned and returned, and sounded it here and there. Then he asked me questions concerning the treatment during illness. I told him all I knew and gave him the little emptied phial. He took it, raised it to his nose, smelt it carefully.

"'All of this?' said he—'all of this at a dose?'

"I rose, stumbling to my feet; a frightful thought had flashed into my mind.

"'All. Benedicite exacted it,' murmured I, bending my head.

"'And you yielded. Fool! An operation should have been performed, a simple and easy one. Had you waited I should have saved this woman!'"

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A MILK-WHITE beach of coral sand, on which were strewn thousands of exquisite shells and strange sponge forms. In front, dancing blue waters of a Southern sea, stretching away into infinite space and ruffled into flashing white caps by the strong breath of the trade wind. As a background to the beach stood a dense grove of cocoanut palms, stateliest and most graceful of trees. The myriad slender tips of their huge leaves rustled in the warm wind like the sharp patter of raindrops in a heavy shower.

Down where the white trunks shot, tall and slender, to the dim arches of the living roof all was in dark, cool shadow, flecked now and then by dancing points of golden sunlight. Mingled with the salt breath of the sea was a faint odour from spathes of corn-coloured blossoms high up among the leaf-crowns.

Beneath these hung clusters of fruit in all stages of development, from the size of a marble to that of a football. On the ground lay scores of the great, brown, ripened cocoanuts, of so little value in that tropic land that no one cared to pick them up. They were protected by rough three-cornered husks so thick as to more than double their actual size.

On one of them, turned on end, sat a boy wearing a broad-brimmed, high-crowned hat of palmetto braid. He was clad in a white cotton shirt and brown linen trousers turned up at the bottom. His feet were bare, and his legs, hands and face were as brown as an Indian's. He presented an ideal picture of youthful strength, and that perfect health only to be acquired through out-of-door sunshine.

His face, generally bright and happy, was clouded as he sat, with elbows on his knees, resting his chin in his hands, and gazing out over the glinting waters. The object on which his eyes were fixed was a small schooner moored a hundred yards from shore.

A boy wearing a broad-brimmed, high-crowned hat.

She was not more than thirty feet over all in length, but was broad of beam and solidly built.

The month was March and the beach was that of one of those low-cut fertile Florida quays that form the southernmost limit of United States territory.

The boy was John Albury, commonly called "Grit" to distinguish him from the many other John Alburys of that region. The schooner was the *Polyanthus*, formerly owned by Grit's father, who had been lost at sea the autumn before in a boat belonging to a neighbour.

For many years, while he was a widower, Mr. Albury had only occupied his home on the quay at long intervals, spending most of his time with his boy and girl, Grit and Matey, on board the *Polyanthus*, wrecking, sponging, fishing, while waiting for his cocoanut grove to come into bearing and, as he finally hoped, yield him an income.

This life proved a very happy one for all three, and it was a sad day for the children when it was ended by the appearance of a step-mother, who, coming from inland on the mainland, had no knowledge of, nor love for, boats on the water. She was not unkind, but she instituted a new order of things, strongly resented by the sailor boy and girl. Mr. Albury was persuaded to clear the land and put in a crop. Grit weeded tomatoes, and hated them; Matey was made to sew and do housework—while both children were taught to read and write.

Now they had very little of the sailing that they so dearly loved, and for which they longed; for Mrs. Albury could see no good in boats. She even advised her husband to sell the dear old *Polyanthus*, and ship his crops by the regular Quay West trading schooner; but this, to Grit's great satisfaction, he steadily refused to do, though he so far yielded to his wife's prejudices as to spend most of his time on shore while the *Poly* swung idly at her moorings.

When the father was lost at sea in the dreadful hurricane that nearly swept away their home as well, Mrs. Albury's aversion to boats became so bitter that she declared she would sell the *Polyanthus* to the first person who would offer £10 for her.

"But, mother! £10 is a ridiculous price for a fine boat like

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the *Poly*," urged Grit. "She can make that in a single month."

"She never has since I have known anything about her," replied Mrs Albury.

"No, for she hasn't had a chance. You let me take her and I'll show you how much she can make."

"And get drowned like your poor father, and leave only me and Matey to look after the place. No, indeed! You are too valuable to waste that way. I need you ashore, and so do the tomatoes. They'll bring in more money than any boat that was ever built, you see if they don't. I shouldn't be in the least surprised if we make £40 off the crop this year, and twice that sum after we get all the land cleared and planted."

"But boats can make as much as that, mother, and more, too. Why, at a wreck——"

"Nonsense, there aren't any wrecks nowadays, and if there were, what could a boy like you do at one? No; you stick to tomatoes. They're safe and sure, and I'll put temptation out of your way by selling that boat the very first chance I get. You'll thank me for it in the end, see if you don't."

Now the fatal day had nearly arrived. A man in Quay West had sent word that he was coming to look at the *Polyanthus*, and would probably buy her. He might appear at any moment and that was the reason why Grit Albury sat gazing sadly at the dear boat on that glorious March afternoon, instead of gathering the last of the tomatoes that were expected to realise £40.

As the boy slowly rose to return to his work, there came a sound of flying feet and Matey's voice was heard, calling in joyous tones:

"Grit! Oh, Grit! Mother wants you to catch her some fish, and says I can go with you."

The lad only answered, "All right, sister, come along"; but a sudden resolution, that he did not put into words, flashed into his mind. Two minutes later a single skilful throw of a cast-net into the shoal of sardines, always swarming near the coast, had provided a sufficiency of bait, and a light skiff was dancing merrily over the blue waters.

"Why, Grit! Where are you going?" demanded Matey as the skiff was headed directly for the *Polyanthus*.

"Out to the reef, after fish," was the answer that came back.

"But, Grit——"

"Never mind the 'buts' now, little girl. That's where we're a going, and we're going in the schooner too. Mother said fish, but so far as I heard she didn't say what kind of fish, such as Spanish mackerel, king fish, yellow-tails, or drum. You know that we can't find those off the reef any more'n we can get out to where they are in a skiff. Besides, sister, it's our very last chance for a sail in the old *Poly*. She's going to be sold, or rather given away, to-morrow, and I don't suppose we'll ever see her again, or own another boat."

Of course this was convincing, for Matey not only dearly loved to sail, but was firm in her belief that whatever Grit said or did was right. Thus an hour later saw the little schooner, after a glorious run across the broad Hawk Channel, anchored just inside the great coral reef that borders the Gulf Stream for more than 200 miles, and on which huge breakers were dashing themselves into showers of glistening spray.

"Put it in writing, and have it witnessed, Cap'n."

The fishing was superb, and so absorbing that the sun was sinking into its bed of crimson and gold ere either Grit or Matey thought of starting for home. When at length they were ready to go and attempted to get up the anchor all their strength on the windlass failed to move it. It was quite dark before Grit abandoned the attempt to recover their anchor. "Never mind, Matey. It won't hurt us to stay here all night, and as soon as it grows light again I'll dive down there and see what is the matter. "I'm not going to cut the cable and lose that brand new anchor unless I have to."

So they cooked a supper of fish and made themselves so comfortable in the snug little cabin that they rather rejoiced in their adventure than otherwise. So soundly did they sleep that night, that not until he was flung from his locker on to the cabin floor did Grit awaken to the fact that the *Poly* was pitching madly and that a gale was shrieking through her taut rigging.

Calling to Matey the boy sprang on deck, where he was well-nigh beaten down by the furious squall of wind and rain that just then hurled itself against the schooner.

There was an instant of quivering strain. Then something gave way, and Grit knew what had happened. The tense cable had parted, and they were helplessly drifting at the mercy of the storm. For a moment even Grit's stout heart quailed. He could see nothing save the ghost-like forms of leaping breakers that seemed to crowd about him from all sides. He could not even tell from which direction the squall was blowing. Matey had joined him in the cockpit with as full an understanding of the situation as his own.

No words passed between them, for none could have been heard above the shriek of wind and the roar of waters. They seemed to be driving with frightful speed, and as the brother and sister stood hand in hand, waiting their fate, they expected that each moment would see their craft dashed in pieces on the cruel reef.

Minutes passed and still they swept on. Suddenly Grit uttered a great cry of relief that was almost a sob.

"We've passed the breakers! We're clear of the reef! We're out in the Gulf! We're safe, Matey!" he shouted.

To anyone but a sailor it would have seemed that they were anything but safe, out in the open sea, driving through inky darkness, and with the worst squall of the season howling furiously about them; but Matey was a sailor. She knew, and deep down in her heart arose a fervent prayer of thanksgiving.

The next change of scene was most surprising. Daylight had come, and the sun was rising. Before a gentle breeze, with all sail set, the *Polyanthus* was approaching a great steamer that had struck on an outlying spur of the reef during the blinding bewilderment of the recent gale.

"I do believe it's a wreck!" Matey had exclaimed rapturously, when her sharp eyes first discovered the stranded ship.

"Oh, if it only should be!" cried Grit, who could hardly believe that so great a good fortune had befallen them. Then with anxious, beating hearts the young sailors had shaken out their reefs, and laid a course toward the lights that marked the dimly-looming hulk.

"Great Scott!" cried the captain of the stranded steamer, as he caught sight of the schooner's sails. "Here's a reef wrecker already. I believe these fellows live at sea, and can smell a wreck a hundred miles!"

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"Hello, there!" he shouted, a few minutes later, as the schooner drew near. "Take a line, but don't you dare come on board. I'm not in humour to give up my ship to you pirates yet. So stay where you are and I'll come to you."

"Don't you want your cargo lightened, sir, or anchor carried?" inquired Grit anxiously as the captain slid down a rope and stood on the *Poly's* deck.

"No, I'm not in a hurry to break out my hold, and I want to try something else before hedging," answered the captain. "Who is the captain of this craft?"

"I am, sir."

"You?" cried the other, regarding the lad incredulously. "Well, then, where is the crew?"

"There, sir," replied Grit, pointing to Matey.

"Well, I'm blest!" gasped the captain. "A boy and a girl! Even the babes in arms turn wreckers on this coast. However," he added, "perhaps you'll do as well as an older. Can you dive?"

"Of course I can, sir," answered Grit promptly.

"Are you afraid of sharks?"

"I should think not," was the contemptuous answer.

"Well, my men are, and I can't even swim, much less dive," continued the captain, "but I want a diver to go down and tell me just how my ship lies. I have a plan that I am anxious to try, if things are as I think. If you'll help me carry it out, I'll give you £100 for an hour's work, provided we get this ship off within that time. Is it a bargain?"

"Put it in writing and have it witnessed, Cap'n," replied the cautious Grit, "and I'll sign the paper. It only holds for one hour though. Then, if you're not afloat we'll make a new bargain, and if she's to be lightened, I'm to be wreckmaster and take charge, 'cause mine is the first schooner here. Is that agreed?"

"Yes, that's right," smiled the captain grimly. "I reckon you've taken part in wrecks before?"

"A few," laughed Grit.

By the time the paper was made out and handed to Matey for safe-keeping, Grit was ready to perform his share of the bargain. He dived from the bows of the schooner and was gone nearly a minute. Then he came up for breath, and almost immediately dived again.

Sat nearly distracted.

He repeated this operation four times without saying what he had discovered. Meanwhile the passengers and crew of the steamer crowded her rail, and leaning far over, watched his operations with breathless interest.

Finally the young diver clambered on board and related to the captain that his ship had struck, well forward, on a narrow ledge with deep water on both sides, and that she was afloat, with the exception of a space ten feet long near her bow.

"That is just about what I gathered from soundings," replied the captain. "Now I want you to go down again, taking a lead line with you, and find some good-sized hole or crevice as near the bottom of the ledge as you can get. Leave the lead to mark the spot where you came up."

Grit wondered at this strange order, but did as directed, and after several descents into the clear waters finally discovered a deep fissure nearly twenty feet beneath the surface.

"Is the hole large enough to hold this?" asked the captain when the young wrecker again came on board the schooner. As he spoke the former held out a square tin canister, to which was attached a reel of slender copper wire.

"Yes, sir," replied the boy. "It's big enough to hold me."

"Very good. Now, if you will go down once more, taking this can with you, and thrust it as far as possible into the hole, I will not ask you to go into the water again."

Grit cast a curious glance at the captain's face to see if he could detect any indication of madness, but the only signs he discovered were of perfect intelligence and an indomitable will. Still, as the boy again stepped over the side ready to descend into the crystal depths, and the canister was handed to him, his suspicion of the captain's sanity was revived by the latter's instructions.

"Take care of this can as you would of your own life," he said earnestly. "Don't let it hit against anything, and place it gently as far in the crevice as you can reach. It holds your life and fortune, as well as mine."

These words were so strange, and the whole business was so different from the usual proceedings in connection with a wrecked ship, that even as Grit worked at his novel task, far beneath the surface, the one thought that filled his mind was: "He is as crazy as crazy can be." However, he carried out his instructions, and when he regained the schooner's deck found it occupied by all the passengers of the stranded steamer.

"Take them off on a five minutes' cruise," ordered the captain, as with his own hands he cast off the lines holding the schooner. Then he swung himself up the steamer's side and disappeared in his own cabin.

At the end of five minutes the *Polyanthus* was nearly a quarter of a mile away, and her young skipper, who was trying to answer a hundred questions at once from the bewildered passengers, was also wondering what he would do next. All at once it was noticed that the propeller of the great ship was working furiously backwards.

Then came the most surprising thing that has ever happened in all the annals of wrecking on the Florida reefs. There was a heavy vibratory explosion, accompanied by a muffled roar. To those who happened to be looking toward the ship at that moment, she seemed to be lifted bodily from the water.

The next instant she was enveloped and hidden from view in a vast fountain-like column of foam. Directly afterwards the ship re-appeared, floating as steadily as ever in her life on the great billows of the mysterious submarine disturbance, and running rapidly backwards.

Late that afternoon the schooner *Polyanthus* again picked up her moorings off the glistening coral beach.

Mrs. Albury was wild with anxiety over Grit and Matey. A man had come from Quay West for the *Polyanthus*, with a view to purchasing her, but finding her absent, and being pressed for time, had gone away again. He had, moreover, left behind him a letter from the Northern commission house to which Mrs. Albury had sent her tomatoes, stating that the shipment had been spoiled, so that instead of being entitled to returns, she found she was indebted for freight charges.

As the poor woman sat quite overwhelmed by her misfortunes there came an exulting shout outside, and the next moment Grit and Matey rushed in, alive and well.

"Hurrah, mother!" cried the former, as he wildly waved a slip of paper above his head. "We've got your fish, and only stayed out a little longer to give the old '*Poly*' a chance to earn this £100, just to show you what she was good for."

"What on earth do you children mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Albury slowly, as she took the New York draft for £100 from Grit's hands to examine it. "How could a mere boy and a still younger girl like you two wreck a big steamer and get her off!"

"Ma," replied Grit, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, "I don't exactly understand how we did it; but I think we blew her up with dynamite."

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A MATRIMONIAL GAME OF CHESS.

OLD Mr. Archer was a devoted chess player, and an expert at that. He held chess to be the only game fit for a gentleman. There were few of his acquaintances who could cope with him, and but one among them who could match him fairly. That was James Bittles, his lawyer. It was a close contest between the two—first one ahead, and then the other. Bittles stood high in his profession, but he mainly won and retained Archer's confidence by his ability as a chess-player. He was barely forty, and Archer maintained that by the time he reached sixty he would surpass all others.

Archer had a daughter—his only child. Her father had married late in life, and ten years after the birth of the girl, her mother had died. Letty had a place in his heart next to chess itself. A bright, lively and pretty girl was Letty Archer, and she would be a heiress to something over £100,000.

Her father feared she would become the prey to a fortune-hunter, and endeavoured to avert it by the provision of his will. He neglected to execute his testament, however, until Letty was nearly twenty years old, and unmarried still. It was none too soon, for the week after he died suddenly of an apoplectic fit.

When the will was opened, it was found that Bittles was named sole executor, and constituted guardian of Letty until she was twenty-one, and trustee of all the estate, real and personal. The conditions of the trust were, that if Letty married with the consent of Bittles, the trustee was to turn over to her all the property on the day of the wedding, and as long as she remained unmarried after twenty-one; but if she married without his consent, she was to receive only five hundred a year, and the residue of the estate, beyond that necessary to secure this payment, was to be conveyed to a third party, or her heirs. This third party was described as:

"Catherine Sinclair, daughter of Gordon Sinclair, if she be still single; or, if she be married, then to the said Catherine Sinclair by whatever name she may be now known, to her and to her heirs for ever."

A further provision was that in case the said Catherine Sinclair, by whatever name she might be known, was dead and had left an heir or heirs, the property over and above the reserved amount in the contingency mentioned was given, devised, and bequeathed to him, her, or them.

Who Catherine Sinclair or her father was Letty could not tell, nor could the lawyer, but it was suggested that it was an early flame of Archer's. Some thought that the possible legatee was mythical, and brought forward to scare Letty from making an imprudent match. But the power of Bittles in the matter was as absolute as pen and ink could make it.

Bittles proved himself to be a vigilant guardian and a careful trustee—guarding his ward against adventurers, and managing the estate with prudence and vigour. Everything went well until about ten months after Archer's death. Then the current of affairs rippled a little.

Letty and Bittles both fell in love—Letty with Carter Cooke, a rich young man of good family, and Bittles, in spite of himself, with Letty, who did not care a snap for him, looking upon the middle-aged bachelor as a venerable person, and bestowing her heart upon his younger rival. Love is like the measles, and if we be attacked with it in middle age the disorder assumes an aggravated form. Bittles had a very severe attack indeed.

Letty might well be excused for reciprocating the feelings of Carter Cooke. The young man was not only by birth but by culture and associations a gentleman, with no censurable habits, and with polished manner. He had a well-proportioned figure, a pleasing face, and was well liked in fashionable circles in London, where he spent about half the year; and though not by any means as rich as Letty would be, was possessed of a handsome competence.

Bittles pronounced him to be a fortune-hunter, and frowned upon his suit, really because it interfered with the one he wished to make. Letty was not of an age to reflect on the serious consequences of her guardian's disapproval, and had she been, her cheerful temper would have led her to optimism. Then Carter Cooke was a skilful chess-player, and Letty, who had been taught by her father, was about as expert as he, which strengthened the bond between them.

The wooing went on in spite of the frowns of Bittles, and the latter began to show the bitterness of defeat. This was seen when the young lover, with Letty's consent, made a formal proposal to the guardian for the hand of his ward.

"No, sir; decidedly no!" replied Bittles. "I have nothing against you personally, Mr. Cooke. Your respectability is undoubted; but I do not consider you—nor will anyone else—a match for Miss Archer in fortune.

"I have examined the statement your solicitor laid before me, and find that you have barely a thousand a year, while the property of my ward yields many times that amount, most of it in property that is rising in value. I should be false to my duty if I approved of the match under such circumstances."

"Very good, sir," retorted Cooke. "Far be it from me to say that disappointed pretensions of your own prompt your refusal. I will admit that it is a mere sense of duty, if that admission pleases you. But I am authorised by Letty to say that when she arrives at the age of twenty-one, should your consent to our marriage be refused, we will marry without it. That will be the next move on the board, Mr. Bittles."

"You are playing a costly game, sir."

"Not at all, sir. At all events, I shall call on the bishop to capture your queen," replied Cooke good-humouredly, and bowed himself out of the room with mock courtesy.

When Letty heard of this positive refusal, in spite of her avowed contempt for money she was disposed to be downcast. But Carter whispered to her a secret—a proverbially dangerous thing to do to a woman—and Letty, after a look of astonishment, burst into a ripple of silvery laughter.

"Oh, you dear delightful boy!" she exclaimed. "Who would have thought of it?"

And Letty renewed her laughter, for the secret seemed to her the most comical thing in the world.

Bittles did not at all desire to exact the penalty, but he did very much desire to break the disagreeable connection. But, how? Letty went into society under the chaperonage of Mrs. Burroughs, Bittles' own sister, a well-to-do widow, who was four years his senior, and liked the mild kind of dissipation which she enjoyed by virtue of her office.

At her dances, tea parties, and the opera, or wherever Letty went, Carter Cooke was sure to be; and Letty suffered him to assume the right of prospective ownership in a way that drove all other suitors from the field.

Letty made no secret of her feelings, and wore her engagement ring openly. Mrs. Borroughs, who liked Cooke, tacitly aided and abetted. It soon became known that Bittles frowned on Cooke, and folks were curious to learn how the affair would end; as though in such a case, with two wilful young people, it could end in any way but one. Bittles was duly informed of this open courtship, and the lectures he bestowed upon Letty in consequence only increased his ward's dislike of himself, until it deepened into positive aversion.

Bittles trusted to time and the chances. He did not believe that Letty, when the pinch came, would sacrifice so large a portion of her property for a mere girlish love, which might be destroyed at any time by a lover's quarrel; nor that Cooke, whom he had brought himself to believe had mercenary motives, would care to take her with so much less money.

Fifteen hundred a year of her husband's and five hundred of her own to one of Letty's expensive habits meant almost exclusive rural residence; and he knew that Letty did not like living in the country, except during the time of flowers and sunshine. Bittles waited, therefore, not without reasonable hope.

He had calculated on an ally in his sister, and, to insure her co-operation, told her of his hopes and fears. She laughed at him.

"James," she said, "this is the most absurd thing possible. She is about half your age. You have staid, bachelor habits,

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and Letty, though she's a good girl, is fond of life and society. She'd drive you mad in six months, and put you in the grave in less than a year. If you must make an exhibition of yourself, matrimonially, choose some rich widow of thirty to forty, who would suit you better."

"Hang rich widows!"

"Quite polite and complimentary, considering that I am a widow with a comfortable income. You had better give it up. I have sounded Letty to the depths, and know that she loves young Cooke; and he is—putting the question of fortune on one side—a capital match for her. I would have preferred her to have made a richer marriage, but they will have enough between them."

"No, they'll not; for I will never give my consent. I'll take her from you—lock her up, if need be——"

"You are a lawyer and know better, James. You may refuse your consent, though everyone will penetrate your motives, and laugh at you; but, as to the locking up—they do such things in plays and novels, not in real life."

"She is under my control until she is twenty-one."

"Oh, yes—doubtless: that is nominally—for three months more. Then she'll marry in spite of you. If you strip her of all but £500 a year you'll incur general reproach, and gain no satisfaction in the long run. The best you can do is to keep off the wedding for a short time. Give in. If you were ten years younger I might strain a point to help you—not as it is."

As the Irish peasant girl says. "She was as stiff as he was stout," and Bittles fell back on his move of the forfeiture, which he thought would deter both parties for some time, and in the meanwhile no one could tell what chance quarrel, a newer face, or the whims of a woman might do.

Just then fate seemed to come to the assistance of the guardian-lover. It assumed the shape of a new suitor, or something like it, and, to the delight of Bittles, it was Major Bolling.

"Fire fight fire," thought Bittles.

Major Phil Bolling was considerably older than Carter Cooke.

The major was of the old school, popular with the ladies, to whom he showed a respect almost reverential, and he was very much attracted by Letty Archer, and she liked to chat with him, and draw out his old-fashioned courtesy. They moved in the same set, and met frequently.

Carter Cooke was at this time called to Paris on business, and the major slid into his place, in spite of his years, and displayed attentiveness that led people to suspect that he had pretensions. To the surprise of Mrs. Borroughs, this grew into an almost confidential intimacy. Cooke seemed to have been forgotten in his absence, and Bittles chuckled. The gallant ex-officer showed himself to be under a spell, and expressed his admiration in the most positive terms.

Letty and the major got along famously, and his adulation apparently quite supplied the absence of Cooke. This was supplemented by the attentions of her guardian, who became kind and bland again.

Letty's twenty-first birthday came round, and Mrs. Burroughs' stately mansion was thrown open in honour of the event. The major was specially invited; so was Carter Cooke, who had returned from Paris and had been visiting his place at Highover, where he had been superintending repairs and alterations. Bittles was there, of course, gorgeously arrayed in honour of the occasion.

About noon Letty was missing, and the absence of the major was noted. Cooke had not yet come. Letty was not to be found in the house; but one of the servants had noticed that she and the major had gone out together, entered a carriage in waiting not far off, and been driven away. It was surely most extraordinary, and Bittles grew excited over the fact. It was probably some girlish freak, to result in some surprise, and so it proved.

At one o'clock a number of carriages drove up before the door. From the foremost of these descended the major, who handed out Letty, who was followed by Cooke. From the other carriages there alighted a number of "the set." It was quite a little procession that filed in, the major at the head, as proud and self-appreciating as a drum-major at the head of a street parade.

"Well, here you are," said Bittles. "I really began to fear, major, that you and my ward had eloped."

"Nothing of the kind, I assuh you," replied the other. "I was me'ly the best man on this joyous occasion. I have the honah to introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Cahtah Cooke."

"Married!" cried Bittles, aghast.

"Yes, sir," responded Cooke. "My bishop, in the shape of a surpliced clergyman, has enabled me to capture your queen," and he drew Letty's arm within his own.

"Very well, sir. Miss Archer is of age and has a right; but, as she has married without my consent, she has thrown away a large fortune for a beggarly five hundred a year. I shall search for the heirs of Catherine Sinclair to-morrow. You have taken the queen? I cry check to the queen, sir."

"Excuse me, sir," retorted Cooke, "but you utterly mistake the situation on the board. Mrs. Cooke will have a larger allowance of pin money. I shall make it a thousand, with an unlimited command of a cheque-book which your action has made equal to a heavy drain."

"My action! Pooh!—stuff!"

"No, no, sir! You need not hunt far to-morrow. My cousin here, Major Bolling, who is the genealogist to both families, can show you that Catherine Sinclair, daughter of Gordon Sinclair, married with the fourth Carter Cooke, of Highover, and unfortunately died three years since, four years after her husband. She left one heir, a son, the fifth Carter Cooke, whom I have the honour to present to you as the husband of your ward, and the happiest man on earth. Mr. Bittles—checkmate."

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THE MAN MY SISTER MARRIED.

CHAPTER XV.

"I AM at a loss to understand the meaning of your message," said the colonel, stiffly, standing by the table, glowering at me. "You are fond of dramatic effects. I suppose you intend some sort of a scene?"

"Not unless you make it," I answered, coolly, as Liz went out and slammed the door as a token of her disapproval.

"No witchcraft," he continued hatefully, as he took a chair and looked into my face in that insolent way of his.

"No, Justina gave your gold piece to the church. Yara, the man you sent to murder John Scott, is dead. Your cousin bears a charmed life, you see. I want to talk to you about Xarras."

I noticed then he was looking haggard and old. I wondered if his inky hair and moustache were not dyed. I heard afterwards that he was a spendthrift and gambler, and broken in fortune, had come to America to seek aid from the very man he had wronged. He did receive some money, but not what he hoped, and then his only desire was to be revenged on John.

"I thought Yara told you about him in that trance," sneered the colonel.

"He tried to, but was so eager to show me Xarras was in Mexico; I was sure he was not, so I went up to the attic in the Scott house."

"And you found nothing?" said the colonel, smiling confidently.

"Well, only two letters in the pocket of a faded grey coat."

He sprang to his feet with a curse. The rushing tide of memory brought him back to the day he must have put them there, and he realised what their contents were. He turned on me with a torrent of ugly epithets.

"You can say all you want to," I said, quietly, "the only thing I care about is to have you go away, so that John will not be a thing like you."

"You'd better look into his past then. Bah! He has no intention of marrying you. I should think you would remember what you were."

"I want you first to give me some proof of Katherine's death, someone abroad to whom I can write; then you must leave Galveston immediately, otherwise I shall tell John you are Xarras."

"He will not believe you."

"My Aunt Margaret knew you, and I have the letters. She only spared you because Katherine was guilty, and she did not want him to have a crime on his soul."

He made a contemptible insinuation about Aunt Marg and John, and I jumped to my feet: "Don't dare to slander her, or I cannot keep my secret. I will not endure any more. I have given you your choice; the future rests with you."

He smiled, and threw a card on the table. "Write to that address in Havre, France. You will learn there of Katherine's death and burial. I give it to you because, little fiend as you are, I like you. Why are you so anxious to know about her?"

"I mean to marry John," I said, "and her hateful memory shall not come between us."

"My blessing on you," he laughed. "I think you are even cleverer than your sister."

He left Galveston the next day, and years afterwards I thought, in a wrinkled and tremulous old man at Monte Carlo, at a *rouge-et-noir* table, clasping his winnings with yellow, shaking hands, I recognised Dean Gregory. We looked at each other, but neither spoke, for I dared not tell the man with me, and Dean bore me no goodwill. That was the last of him.

Clasping his winnings with yellow, shaking hands.

I wrote to Havre, and in due time received a number of official-looking documents, certifying that a woman, named Katherine Dean, died at a certain street and number, and giving her age and general description. Aunt Marg said she had heard Katherine took Dean's first name when they went away together, so she was sure from the description, allowing for the changes of time and a lawless life, the dead woman was my sister.

I have not mentioned John all this time because I was angry. When he knew I was better, he went away from Galveston, and all we knew of him was from Bruce, who brought me flowers daily. I did not get strong very fast, and the doctor said I had some trouble weighing on my mind. I did not tell him nor any of them what it was, but I did not want to get well, life was so dreary to me.

One week Aunt Marg was odd and silent, like she used to be. She had nothing to say, and went about in one of her dreamy spells. Late one afternoon, she asked me for the letters I had found in the trunk. I petted and loved her a good deal, for I tried to make up for those wasted years. I told her they were at the bottom of a pile of sheets in the linen closet; that I had not read a line of them, I dared not, I thought a curse was on them.

"It may be a blessing," she said, absently. She came back to me with them in her hand and her bonnet on, with her long crêpe veil. Any other woman than her I would have thought wore that veil because it looked so well over her white hair. "Some day, my dear," she said, as she kissed me and stood there stroking my hair, "I want you to think of this time and remember how well I loved you." She did no. explain her words, but went swiftly away.

I watched her going towards the town. I played a little on the piano, but my fingers were too weak. I tried reading, but I could not fix my thoughts; and then I cried a little. I did not like to see myself in the mirror, I had grown so thin and pale. My eyes were too big for my face, and my gowns had to be taken in. I heard Liz tell Bruce she thought I was going into consumption.

I remember I had on a new gown that day, a soft pearl and white like a sea-gull, or a foggy day along the beach when the waves are all white with foam. I had white ribbons on it that made me think of a baby's coffin lined with satin, so dainty and pure. It was a gruesome sort of a fancy that pleased me. I wandered to the window and then my heart gave a great leap; there at our gate, talking to my Aunt Margaret, who was looking pale and strange, stood Mr. John Scott. I ran and picked a bunch of violets out of the vase and pinned them in my breast. I had not forgotten my vanity, even if I was plain and thin. I heard the gate click and his step on the path, and then the door opened and he staggered in. He had a queer dazed look, his face was ghastly, his eyes blazing and wild.

"I don't even know that you are Letty," he cried, with a strange, mad laugh; "my world has all gone wrong; I fled because I loved you more than her. My God, I fled because of that!" Then he broke into a sob that was half a groan, and clenched his fists. "Did you read those letters?" he went on, tearing them from his pocket and throwing them at me. "All these years I shrined her as a saint. Read them now."

"No, not one word; she was my sister."

He fell into a chair by the table and hid his face on his outstretched arms. After a little I went to him. "John," I

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said faintly, "she is dead and I am alive. Is it kind to treat me thus? Forget and forgive. We know that she is dead."

"But he is not," he cried fiercely. "You have sent him away, Margaret says, but you only stayed my hand for a little while."

"You have no right to touch him. Katherine was most to blame. How can you avenge a wrong to her when there was none? The vendetta of those other men I can pardon. They had the right. One of those Mexicans living was a reproach, almost a dishonour to them, after that day. But you," then I went to him and laid my hand on his shoulder, "have you not done all you could to make restitution? If you must be a murderer, begin with me; only a little more of my misery and I can be released."

"What do you mean?" he said coldly.

"I never knew what love was till you taught me, John," I went on, bravely; "that was not friendship, all that month, not the affection of brother and sister, but lover's love. I have been dying for you. I cannot explain it, but somehow you became a part of my life, and without you I will not live. I am not calm and good like other women, like Aunt Marg. All the pent-up affection of my starved life I gave to you. I am even without shame in telling you of it. I am so hopeless, John."

"Have you thought of my life? What I have been? Do you think any blessing would come to us? I hunted every man of those Mexicans down to his death. What would the world call me; how would it judge me?"

"You can reason so calmly, you do not care for me," I said bitterly; then a mad idea came to me, nor will I conceal what I did. He was sitting there with averted face. He had not looked at me, and I stood a full moment and watched him. Then, possessed by my worst spirit, I went to him and covered his eyes with one hand. I put my other arm round his neck, and stooped and kissed him full on the mouth. "You shall love me so well," I said, "that you will not argue but risk all, dare fate and all the world, to care for me."

Had he not called me "darling" that night on the beach? I had the right anyway. He turned swiftly and caught me in his arms. Aunt Marg's bird, as if he felt a sudden change in the temperature of the room from storm to sunshine, began to sing merrily. I lifted my head from John's breast and looked into his eyes.

He caught both my hands.

"Is there any memory between us, John; any shadow of the past?" I inquired of him anxiously.

"I will have no past; I have loved for the first time," he cried.

"I woke you as the Prince woke the Princess," I laughed.

"I'd sleep another hundred years,
Oh, love, for such another kiss,"

he quoted, and I stared in astonishment at John repeating love poetry. I took those two letters and flung them in the grate. "They are gone, and that ends all mysteries," I said. "I have confessed until I am weary of it. My mind is like a clean piece of paper. Let's play we were wandering in space until to-day, and just found our souls. I wish I were not so ghostly-looking."

"I think you prettier than ever," he smiled.

"Then you must really and truly care for me," I said, "for this very morning Liz said no one would ever think I had any good looks at all."

He caught both my hands. "Dearest, I love you," he said, and from that moment I never doubted him. Of course, grandfather had to come in then, and he grinned as he looked at us.

"I allus thought you two liked each other," he said, "but it took a powerful long time to find it out."

He was very merry at the tea-table with the usual jokes about my cooking and domestic failings, but I silenced him by saying John had a living conscience now, not he.

"Wal, I ain't too willing to give it to him," said grandfather, almost lovingly, and for that speech I forgave all his teasing. I have made that old cynic love me, and I am proud of myself every time I think of it.

"A colt 'thout speerit don't make no kind o' hoss," grandfather said, when I gently refreshed his memory about calling me skittish. I have never nonplussed him yet.

That moonlight night John sent for his horses and drove me out on the beach. What an enchanted world it was; the glorious silver sky, the plashing of the breakers, the tiny curl of foam splashing the horses' feet and the dark blue sea, gentle in motion as the breathing of a happy sleeper. At that creek where I nearly lost my life John turned to me. It was only a thread of silver now creeping along the sand, but I remembered and shuddered, and, of course, he had to thank me, as lovers do, for saving his dear life.

"I was only thinking about my property," I laughed; "do you know you called me 'darling' that night, for all your marble calm. I read those words in a book once, they fit you so well."

"I have loved you from that day in New Orleans," he said, solemnly. "I fought a long battle with myself, and wherefore? Oh, it was bitterly hard to play father confessor to you."

"About Jim, too," I said, for I was in one of my contrary moods. "I only wanted to marry him because I was tired of home, and I thought, some day, when you were dead, we could live in the big house and the garden would be mine."

"Poor little Eve. I am lucky you did not get Justina to charm me, so that I would wither away and let you get the property sooner."

"Justina says she knew I would marry you, and that was why she told me once the big house would be mine."

"Justina has more staircase wit than any woman I ever saw," laughed John.

"What is staircase wit?"

"The things you remember that you might have said when it is too late. Oh, my pet, what little creatures of to-day we are, at best! Look at the eternal sea, the countless stars, the night that never fails, the days that always dawn. In the great drama of nature and time, how infinitely small are human lives; less than the sands on the shore. A breath, and we are gone; our tragedies are closely followed by a comedy. We love, we forget, and why not? Is it not best to grasp all the happiness we can in passing, our journey is so short?"

"Is it not better that the dead be forgotten," I said, "than that they should harass the living? To give love to those who can feel it rather than to waste it in tears? The blessings to a poor home is better than a costly monument. Oh, dearest, let us live in to-day. If the ghosts of great dead men came back to earth, who among our great men could live? I am weary of the past. I want the present."

"You are such a deep and old philosopher, you make me feel frivolous, and yet I am near forty."

"The best of that is," I laughed, "that I shall never be a frump to you. Women grow old so much faster than men, and that is why boy and girl marriages are often unhappy. I shall keep my good looks and youth when you are too old to care for anything but gruel and a warm hearth."

We drove home to the mansion, where Bruce took the horses, and John and I walked in the rose garden.

"Come, walk in the rose garden, your own enchanted land. Let me fill your arms with flowers and your pretty head with poetry. I will fling away twenty years of my life to be young and a lover."

How much I loved him words cannot express—my other soul. Had we never met, I believe I should have gone unloving

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to my grave. In the morning, trouble began again—it seemed I never could walk save in tangled paths. He came to bid me "good-bye." He would not believe that Katherine was dead until he had been to Havre. There should be no mistake, he said fiercely.

"You are going to find Dean Gregory," I cried, "and you will come back a murderer."

He talked gently and kindly to me, and then promised all I wished him to, his face so white and haggard that, had I not been in one of my worst moods, it would have stricken me to my wicked heart. I even watched him go away without calling after him that I was sorry, but two days later I wrote a most pitiful and penitent letter, which he answered so nobly and forgivingly that I cried myself to sleep for two nights.

Justina was a great comfort during the long weeks of his absence. She read the cards to me every day, and there were always red ones that meant good luck, hearts and diamonds, instead of clubs that are sorrows, and spades that mean death. No dark man travelling in the King of Spades interfered, so my heart grew lighter. I wrote once that I did not believe in Justina's fortune-telling, but a person who never changes his mind is a fool.

My days were somewhat enlivened by preparing my trousseau, all John's gift, and when grandfather had scolded him about it, John said it was a Mexican custom to provide a bride's trousseau, as it is.

When Mrs. Scott came home she sent for me and told me John had said I was to be her daughter now; that she had always loved me, even in my naughty days; and she was so glad that he would be happy. She would not believe God meant his life to be all shadow. Every time I went to the great house she decked me with some of her girlish finery, long laid away quaint jewels, and soft laces, and all manner of pretty things.

"Katherine never let me love her," she said one day, "but you are such a sweet and lovable child, I begin to feel you are my own, as dear to me as my little daughter that died in her childhood."

She read the cards to me every day.

Once she showed me a miniature of that child, and cried over it as mothers do over dead babies, even when near a half-century has passed.

One morning that I shall never forget, I got a telegram: "I will be with you to-night. All is well.—JOHN." And then my waiting was forgotten in the joy of that near meeting.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN John came I was at the great house with his mother, waiting on the steps. He kissed her first, and then, taking my hand, led me into the library.

"She is dead, dear," he said. "When I knew that I went no farther than Havre. I did not let myself think of Dean at all. Will you believe me?"

"I never doubted you," I cried, "only I was so miserable when you went away, I had to be hateful."

"And now all the past is passed. See!" He drew aside the plush curtain, and where Katherine's portrait had been, was now a marine scene, a wreck drifting before a storm, a wild frothing sea, and low hanging, black sky. A picture one would not wish to gaze on often, especially we folks, who live so near the sea, and know its cruelty and disasters. I understood why he desired no pleasant scene. He did not wish to look even where the beautiful face had been.

"I have forgotten that I ever lived," he said, passionately. "I only know the life of to-day, and that I love you. Kiss me and let me claim my wife."

I put out my arms and he held me close to his heart. "Shall we be married to-morrow?" he pleaded, his lips close to mine. "I almost fear to trust the future; life has been so cruel to me."

"Any time you will. I was so miserable when you were gone, time dragged so. And John, I even went back to Justina, back to my old sinful ways; but she told me by the cards you would come home safe and soon—and haven't you?"

"We'll employ her hereafter for a family sybil, a familiar witch of Endor right in the house; and you know even King Solomon did not disdain witchcraft, and no one would expect more wisdom from you than from him. Are the gowns all finished? I know your dainty soul; and are they to your liking?"

I described each one and he did not seem bored at all. He drew me over to the sofa and looked at me fondly.

"You are as plump and pretty as ever, and that is not flattering to me. You never pined a bit."

"You told me long ago I was vulgarly fat; besides, I had to fill out my new finery. Give a woman dressmaking and an unlimited purse, and she will not pine very much."

"Is it those quaint gowns you wear and look so lovely in, 'broidered with silver in odd devices, with bodices, and queer sleeves, and all those little frills you affect, that makes you look like a picture?" he laughingly inquired.

"The idea of your noticing!"

"I know every gown you wear, every lace, pin, and ribbon. I could pick out your particular hat among a thousand. See, I brought you a big diamond ring. Is it rich enough for you? It looks so pretty on your little brown hand. You will travel in diamonds now, according to Justina."

"She meant good luck," I laughed, admiring my new ring.

"You are such a child," he muttered, half sadly.

"That can be remedied in time, John. I wonder if you will like my wedding gown—dead white, soft silk, and lined every inch with silk; I am so extravagant, but it does rustle so beautifully. It is like a shroud, Justina said."

I laid my cheek against his sleeve. How handsome he looked with that smile on his lips, the love light in his beautiful eyes.

Just then Mrs. Scott called us to dinner, and after that John and I wandered in the rose garden, and I promised to be his wife the next day. It almost seemed as if we were defying fate and all the ghosts of the past to be happy.

My wedding day! How odd it is to wake in one's own little white room, and think that never again will the past days come back. That one's very identity is gone. Letty Lombard on the morrow would have vanished from the earth. The moonlight would sift through the tiny window on my empty bed, over the pillow where my head would never rest again.

Then I wondered who would sleep there in the years to come, when the cottage would have passed into other hands. Would some young maid's story be half written there, her innocent dreams and vanities, her thoughts of a lover, her joy at his coming? Would he take her away, and she, like me, whisper farewell to her girlhood, dreading the future, yet by dear love guided to her fate as a wife and mother? I wrote as I finished dressing, "Violet Scott" on a bit of paper, then burned it guiltily with a match.

My last day at home was such a curious one. It seemed

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as though somebody was dead, the house was so quiet, and Liz going about her work on tiptoe. She gave me a few lectures on how to behave in the big house, especially "never to set foot in the kitchen. I must never sile my han's." Aunt Marg and I had some long happy talks, and I loved her better than ever before.

When we drove to the great house, I held her hand all the way. I could hardly realise that I was about to act the star part in that supreme drama in a woman's life. In fact I wanted to run away. I had the carriage window down, and let the cool air off the sea blow across my burning face and lift my hair. I felt as I had done when, possessed by my devouring curiosity, I had taken too much champagne just to see how it felt.

The mansion wore a gala air, with its lighted windows and flowers everywhere. Bruce opened the carriage door with tremendous solemnity, and Mrs. Scott led me to her room to put on my veil. Across the hall was a beautiful chamber, all newly decked in blue and gilt.

"This is your room, dear," she said, leading me there. "You are to stay a week at home before you go to Mexico."

But I would not look at the fine place or anything. I ran away.

"I believe I am almost sick of this getting married," I said miserably. "It makes me think I must be old and solemn all my life."

She pinned my veil, while her maid, a pretty quadroon, helped me put on my long gloves. After Mrs. Scott went down to greet the minister, Aunt Marg came to cry over me, and bid the Letty Lombard—her charge and a doubtful blessing for nearly nineteen years—"good-bye." She was very white and sad, and not until afterward did I realise why she was so strange.

"It is so hard, so bitterly hard," she sobbed.

"But I will be near you always," I said, "and I know I shall be better than I am now; one gets so grown up and womanly after marriage."

She smiled tearfully, going softly out, and who should creep in then but Justina. How she admired me! told the maid I was her baby, her Chica; she had saved my life; and then, as she turned to leave me, she put out her hands in a frightened way, and that queer, blurred look came into her eyes. She ran away from me, and Liz dragged her down the back stairs, where I heard her moaning and muttering her prayers.

I stood in the hall, scared and miserable. A presentiment of misfortune came to me; how or when it would fall I could not think; but the dim corners of the room seemed peopled with eerie shadows, as if the ghosts of those murdered men came back to mock my happiness. Someone touched my shoulder, and I turned with a scared cry. It was only John; and how relieved I was!

"I was thinking of horrible things—ghosts," I stammered. "Oh, John, forgive me for saying that," as I saw his face sadden; "but this place is so big and strange to me."

"Your besetting sin, Justina, has been giving you her blessing," he said, sternly. "If it were not for that day when I met her, long ago, and gave you, a helpless baby to her care, you should never see Justina again."

"Indeed!" I said hotly.

He took my hands then and laughed in my face. "Do you hear the matrimonial shackles clank, dearest? Oh, you sweet, wilful Letty! Am I doing right to link your young life with mine?"

"To a silly thing like me," I said, "but don't be too masterful, John, or you will learn what a temper I have. And I have tried so hard. There is your mother. Must we go down?"

As we went down the stairs, a hush came over me, a solemn feeling, as if I was standing by a coffin, my dead girl's-life. I noticed the people in the room, grandfather, Aunt Marg, Mrs. Scott, and the minister, the servants peeping in at the door, and the odour of flowers massed in profusion. I saw the lace curtain wave to and fro in the light breeze that blew across the perfumed garden and brought the breath of roses to me. Far off the splashing of the sea chimed with the low solemnly spoken words that made us man and wife.

He drew aside the plush curtain.

Was that my voice, faint and far away, saying "I will"? Could I never undo what I had done? unsay those words?

I lifted my eyes as the minister blessed us, and I saw Justina crossing herself with that blurred look in her eyes. When we rose from our knees, John kissed me and whispered, "My wife!" I was not Letty Lombard any more. Aunt Marg and Mrs. Scott called me by my new name, and grandfather, especially, took much pride in it, and I had to hug him and rumple his hair to show him marriage had not changed my ways.

I went up to that blue room and took off my wedding veil. How odd I looked in the big mirror, so young and shy, so childish with my short hair, even in my long gown. John came in and stood smiling at me.

"Come out into the garden, Letty. Can I find you a wrap? It is cool in the night air. I told your maid to put your things here. You will find me handy in waiting on you."

He found the wrap, and we went out into the garden, and, somehow, I wished that I had never known Jim, or wandered with him there. It was late when we turned back to the house, where I saw grandfather make his farewells, and Aunt Marg with her bonnet on.

"It seems as if I ought to go with them," I said, laying my cheek against his sleeve. As we stepped into the porch, I heard the rattle of wheels on the carriage drive to the house.

"Why, Margaret insisted on walking," John muttered, "yet that must be the carriage."

"She never changes her mind," I said, half fearfully; a sudden chill passed over me and I shivered. At that moment a bell pealed through the house, and I saw Bruce go along the hall, and as he went he shut the parlour door. We stood and listened, as people will at anything unusual happening. There was loud talking at the door, Bruce expostulating; then John, looking white and worried, went suddenly and opened the parlour door. He had scarcely reached the threshold when Bruce, ashy with terror, pushed him back forcibly into the room, crying in agonised tones:

"Fo' de good Lawd's sake, Mars John, don't yo' come out heah!"

(*To be continued next week.*)

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THE MYSTERY OF A STOVE.

THERE were five of us in the party—six, counting Tom, the guide, and we were out on the Rockies, shooting. After two days' hard climbing, which we endured with exemplary fortitude, we arrived at the little valley high up in the mountains, which was our destination.

"Jest you all go over into the cabin there and make yourselves comf'ble, while I 'tend to getting the stuff unpacked," said Tom; "there ain't no one there. My pardner, he's down below."

"The cabin appears to be two cabins," said the Colonel, as we approached it.

"That is for economy in ridge-poles," said the doctor; "sleeping apartments on one side and kitchen on the other. In the space between, you keep your stores."

We entered the right-hand section of the twin cabin, which proved to be the kitchen side. There was not much furniture—a table of hewn logs, a chair of bent saplings, and a rough bench.

However, we did not notice such furniture as there was, for each member of the party, as he stepped over the high threshold, had his attention instantly attracted by the stove, and a brief roundelay of ejaculations went along the group.

"Well, that's somewhat strange," said the stockbroker.

"H'm," said the professor, in a mysterious tone, and rubbed his chin.

The stove was a plain, small cooking-range, rather old and rusty. The strange thing about it was its position. Its abbreviated legs stood upon large cedar posts, which were planted in the floor and were over four feet in height. This brought the stove up in mid-air, so that the top was about on a level with the face of the Colonel, and he was six foot two.

We formed in a circle about the stove and stared at it. We felt the posts—they were firm and solid, showing that the mysterious arrangement was a permanent, not a temporary one. Then we all bent our necks and opened our mouths to look up at the hole in the roof through which the stove-pipe vanished.

Suddenly the stockbroker burst into a laugh. "Oh, I understand it now," said he.

"Understand what?" said the Colonel sharply.

"Why Tom has his stove hoisted up so high from the floor."

"So do I," said the doctor; "but I suspect that my explanation is not the same that anyone else would offer."

"Well, I will bet that I am all right," said the stockbroker, "and put up the money."

"I am in this," said the lawyer; "I have a clear idea about that stove, and will back it."

"Count me in too," said the Colonel.

The stockbroker drew a small yellow coin out of his pocket and dropped it on the table.

"He has the stove up there," he said, "to get a better draught. In this rarefied mountain air there is only a small amount of oxygen to the cubic inch, and combustion is more difficult to secure than in the lower latitudes.

"I have heard that if you get high enough up you can't cook an egg—that is, I mean, water won't boil—or something like that," he continued, thrown into sudden confusion by the discovery that the professor's eye was fixed upon him with a sarcastic glance.

"Is that supposed to be science?" demanded the professor.

"Well," said the stockbroker doggedly, "never mind the reasons. Experience is probably good enough for Tom. He finds that he gets a better draught for his stove by having it up in mid-air, so he has it there."

"The right explanation," began the professor, "is the simplest. My idea is that ——"

"Excuse me," interrupted the stockbroker, tapping the table; "are you in this pool?"

The professor made a deposit and proceeded:

"Have you noticed that our host is a very tall man? Like most men of his height, he hates to bend. If the stove were near the floor, he would have to stoop down low when he cooked a rasher of bacon. Now he can stand up and do it with ease. Your draught theory is no good; the longer the pipe, if it is straight, the better the fire will burn."

"Professor," remarked the Colonel, "I regret to have to tell you that your money is gone. Tom told me on the way up that his partner did all the cooking, and he is a man of rather short stature."

The Colonel then paid his compliments to the pool, and continued: "Now, my idea is that the stove heats the room better there than on the floor. It is only a cooking-stove, but when the winter is cold, it makes this room comfortable. Being up in the middle of the space, it heats it all equally well, which it could not do if it were down below."

The doctor greeted this theory with a loud laugh. "Colonel," he said, "you are wild—right off the mark. Hot air rises, of course, and the only way to disseminate it is to have your stove as low as possible."

"I think," said the Colonel, "that I could appreciate your argument better if you would put your money in the pool."

"The pool is mine," said the doctor, as he deposited his coin; "you will all adopt my idea the moment you hear it, and Tom, who will be here in a minute, will bear me out. This room is very small; it has but little floor space and none of it goes to waste. Now, if he had put the stove down where we expected to find it, Tom could not have made use of the area underneath as you see he has done.

"On all sides of the supporting posts you will notice there are hooks, on which he hangs his pans. Underneath there is a space for pots and cooking utensils of various sorts. What could be more convenient? Under your ordinary stove there is room only for a poker and a few cockroaches."

The lawyer, who had been listening to the opinions offered by the others, now stepped forward and dropped a coin on the table. He then rendered his decision as follows:

"It appears that none of you have noticed the forest of hooks in the roof just over the eaves. They are not in use at present, but they are there for some purpose. I imagine that during the winter huge pieces of venison and bear's meat dangle over the stove and are dried for later use. Now if the stove were on the floor it would be too far from the roof to be of any service in this way."

"Here comes old Tom!" shouted the Colonel, who had stepped to the open door while the lawyer was speaking.

The old trapper put down the various articles of baggage with which his arms were loaded, and came into the kitchen cabin where we all stood. He glanced at the group and then at the stilted stove in our midst.

"I see you air all admirin' my stove," said he, "and I'll bet you've been a-wondering why it is up so high."

"Yes, we have," said the professor; "how did you know it?"

"People most allus generally jest as soon as they come into the place begin to ask me about it—that's how I knowed."

"Well, why is it up so high?" demanded the stockbroker impatiently, with a side glance at the well-developed pool on the table.

"The reason's simple enough," said Tom, with a grin that showed his bicuspids; "you see we had to pack all this stuff up here from down below on donkeys. Originally there was four j'ints of that stove pipe, but the cording wasn't drawed tight enough on the donkeys that was carrying them, and two of 'em slipped out and rolled down the mountain. When we got here and found that there wasn't but two pieces left, I reckoned that I would have to kinder h'ist the stove to make it fit the pipe; so I jest in and h'isted her. And thar she is yet. Say, what is all this here money on the table for?"

There was a deep silence, which lasted so long that Tom ventured to repeat his question about the money.

"It is a pool," said the doctor sadly, "and, as near as I can make out, it belongs to you."

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